Since 2016, resource-rich Hadramawt has shifted from a peripheral security zone to a central arena influencing the future of southern Yemen. What distinguishes Hadramawt from other theaters is not the presence of a single dominant actor, but the convergence of two parallel military systems, each backed by a regional power, each claiming legitimacy, and each seeking to impose a durable security reality without triggering direct confrontation.

On one side stands the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the broader southern military structure it has managed and consolidated under the framework of the southern forces. On the other side are the Saudi-backed forces, primarily the National Shield Forces (NSF) and the Yemen Emergency Forces (YEF), reinforced by local Hadrami armed formations attempting to block unilateral dominance by the STC in eastern Yemen.

Methodology: For this report, we conducted key interviews with active military officers with knowledge of southern areas of operations involving both UAE- and Saudi-backed forces. We also drew on open-source intelligence (OSINT), including satellite imagery, video analysis, and public reporting, to develop, to the best of our knowledge, the closest possible approximation of the order of battle. This includes assessments of the composition and disposition of forces, such as unit formations, estimated force size, locations, command structures, and key personnel. These elements are outlined in the sections below.

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Short-term Forecast

While current indicators point toward de-escalation, driven in large part by active diplomatic engagement from Washington, the situation on-the-ground remains fragile. Two days ago, Secretary of State and Acting National Security Advisor Marco Rubio spoke with UAE Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, underscoring the importance of stability in Yemen and coordination in confronting Iran-backed Houthi forces. This language reflects a shared understanding between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh that continued

alignment within the anti-Houthi coalition is essential, and that any direct friction between their respective partners would only weaken their broader strategic position.

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That said, the military reality tells a more complicated story. The ongoing buildup of forces from both camps and their close proximity in an open, remote desert zone creates inherent risks. The area west of Al-Khash'a in Hadramawt, north of 'Arain in Shabwa, and south and east of Al-'Abr in Hadramawt forms a rough triangle where units are operating within striking distance of one another, with limited natural buffers and high reliance on exposed supply lines. Given these conditions, and despite diplomatic efforts to contain tensions, there remains a meaningful risk of localized confrontation or accidental escalation. Based on current force postures and movements, the probability of a limited clash or security incident in this area can reasonably be assessed at around 60 percent.

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This is not Scenario Five (a worst-case spiral into a multi-front southern civil war), but rather Scenario Three: a protracted crisis weakening the anti-Houthi front, as described in the 9 December Basha Report Substack.

The STC-Backed Southern Military Structure

Since its establishment in 2017, the STC has moved beyond its original role as a political umbrella for a loose mix of political and armed groups and has assumed direct control over southern defense and security forces. This consolidation occurred under several designations, including the Supreme Authority of the Southern Armed Forces, also known as the Supreme Military Authority of the Southern Army and Security, but is most commonly referred to as the Southern Armed and Security Forces (SASF). The SASF functions as a centralized command responsible for operational planning, recruitment, logistics, and coordination among all affiliated forces.

The STC structure also incorporates the 4th and 2nd Military Region Command (MRC), Shabwa Defense Forces (SDF), Southern Giant Brigade Forces, Support and Reinforcement Brigades, infantry and Thunderbolt Brigades, the Military Axes of Shabwa, Al Ghaydah, Abyan, and Socotra, the Security Belts Forces (SBF), Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), Military Police units, southern Presidential Guard units, government and oil facility protection forces, and joint formations such as the Al Dali Joint Forces and the Yafe' Combat Axis. Together, these forces give the STC the ability to deploy layered security rather than relying on a single dominant formation.

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The total manpower under this structure is estimated to be no fewer than 120,000 personnel across southern governorates. In Hadramawt specifically, this force ecosystem includes the Hadramawt Elite Forces (HEF) operating under the 2nd MRC, which remains the most professional and locally rooted formation in the governorate. These forces control Mukalla, the coast, and critical oil and gas infrastructure, and they are structured around battalion sized units with strong intelligence and rapid response capabilities.

As of 1 December 2025, it is estimated that a minimum of 10,000 forces were deployed into Hadramawt from outside the governorate, marking a significant shift in the security and military balance. Several senior field commanders have maintained a visible operational presence across the governorate. Brigadier Abduldaim Al Shaibi, commander of the Barshaid Brigade, has overseen operations in Al Qatn and Wadi Sir, while Major General Othman Haidara Muawadha, commander of the 14th Thunderbolt Brigade, has remained active in Hura and Wadi Al Ayn.

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Overall command in the coastal districts, including Mukalla, rests with Major General Talib Saeed Barjash, commander of the 2nd MRC and the Hadramawt Brigade, under which the HEF operate along the coast.

In Sayoun, Brigadier Saleh Ali bin Al Sheikh Abu Bakr, widely known as Abu Ali Al Hadrami, has emerged as a central security figure as commander of the Security Support Brigade (SSB) within the HEF and is widely regarded as the de facto commander overseeing the former 1st MRC area.

Additional field leadership includes Brigadier Aseel bin Rashid of the 4th Infantry Brigade and Brigadier Mukhtar Al Noubi of the 5th Support and Reinforcement Brigade, both closely associated with rapid maneuver and operational sustainment. Along the Shabwa Hadramawt frontier, Brigadier Nasser Atef Al Mashoshi Al Yafei commands the 1st Support and Reinforcement Brigade, with Brigadier Wagdi Ba‘oom of the 2nd Shabwa Defense Forces Brigade also present, while on the Hadramawt Al Mahrah axis Southern Special Forces operate under Major General Fadl Ba‘ash alongside Brigadier Siyaf Al Ma‘kar of the Sixth Support and Logistics Brigade.

Parallel to this command structure, a broad mobilization of units has reshaped the military posture across the eastern theater. Battalions drawn from at least ten brigades were redeployed from multiple southern governorates into Hadramawt, Al Mahrah, and parts of Shabwa, including seven battalions from the Support and Reinforcement Brigades previously based in Abyan, infantry formations such as the Third Brigade, and elements of the SBF.

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SSB units were positioned at key junctions and infrastructure sites across Al Dis District, around the Al Dhabba oil port in Ash Shihr, in Rabwah in Mukalla, on the outskirts of Tarim, and in the Jathmah area near the former 1st MRC headquarters.

STC Units trained in Aden at Jabal Hadid were transferred to Mukalla before being pushed into the Wadi and desert zones, extending as far as Thamud and Ramah near the Saudi border, where they assumed control of former armored and border guard facilities.

In neighboring Al Mahrah, Special Security Forces, border guards, and elements of the Southern Giants Brigades established a presence across the governorate. In Shabwa, three brigades from the Shabwa Defense Forces advanced into the Armah and Jardan deserts and toward the outskirts of Asaylan, while the 2nd Shabwa Defense Brigade moved into Dahr, Rakhyah, and the Hadramawt Shabwa border areas. Reinforcements from the Southern Giants Brigades, including formations from the Saba Axis in Ma'rib, completed a multi axis deployment spanning coastal areas, the Wadi, desert interiors, and critical border corridors.

Supporting the HEF are multiple STC aligned formations that can reinforce the governorate when required. These include the Southern Giants Brigades, which bring heavy infantry and armored capabilities, the Thunderbolt Brigades with airborne and shock troop functions, the Support and Reinforcement Brigades that specialize in logistics and rear security, and the Southern Resistance Brigades composed of veteran fighters with extensive combat experience.

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In Hadramawt, this system emphasizes control over cities, ports, oil facilities, and coastal lines, while maintaining the ability to project force inland if necessary. Command and control is centralized, communications are secure, and logistics chains are shorter and more reliable due to UAE backing and years of institutional development.
Weapons and Equipment Balance

Former officers from the 1st MRC and local Hadrami sources informed the Basha Report that the 1st MRC's arsenal was exceptionally large prior to the outbreak of the civil war in 2015. At this stage, it remains difficult to determine with precision how much of that arsenal was expended or damaged over the course of the decade-long civil war, or alternatively looted, seized by outlaw groups, or captured by STC-affiliated forces following the collapse of the command.

In Yemen's military structure, remote and desert-based commands traditionally maintain ammunition and supply stockpiles well above standard brigade levels due to the vulnerability of ground lines of communication (GLOC), a factor that helps explain why the First Military Region was heavily stocked, though these assessments largely reflect its pre-2015 force posture.

At its height, the 1st MRC controlled a dense network of units and installations, including its main headquarters in Sayoun, the 135th Infantry Brigade, special forces units, air force assets including helicopters, a presidential guard garrison, and the Al-Hadharim Battalion. To the west, the Al-Khasha' operational axis encompassed the 37th Armored Brigade and the 315th Armored Brigade, while the Thamoud axis extended through Ramah and included the 11th Border Guard Brigade.

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Therefore, the collapse of the 1st MRC ultimately led to the seizure and neutralization of one of the largest concentrations of heavy weaponry ever held by a non-Houthi formation in eastern Yemen. The captured arsenal included a broad range of strategic and tactical systems accumulated over decades. Among the most significant were surface-to-surface missile systems, alongside thousands of anti-armor weapons such as BGM-71 TOW missiles, Energa anti-tank grenades, and extensive stocks of anti-tank mines. These capabilities represented a substantial offensive and deterrent force that, had it remained intact and cohesive, could have significantly altered the military balance in Hadramawt and adjacent regions.

In addition to missile and anti-armor systems, large quantities of conventional heavy weapons were secured, including extensive artillery and rocket launcher inventories comprising self-propelled artillery, multiple howitzer types, heavy mortars, and several multi-barrel rocket systems such as Grad and BM-series launchers. Armored assets seized or rendered inoperable included dozens of main battle tanks spanning older Soviet-era models to more modern platforms, as well as hundreds of armored personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, reconnaissance vehicles, and utility armored trucks. Limited air assets were also accounted for, including helicopter gunships and ISR unmanned aerial systems.

The STC aligned forces benefit from superior integration of armored units, drones, intelligence, and special forces. Saudi-backed forces, while numerically substantial, rely more heavily on defensive depth, heavy equipment positioned near the border, and the deterrent effect of Saudi air power.

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Saudi Backed Forces in Hadramawt

The Saudi backed military presence in Hadramawt has expanded rapidly since late 2024 and accelerated further after the collapse of the 1st MRC in the Wadi. This presence consists of three overlapping components. The first is the NSF, the second is the YEF, and the third consists of locally rooted armed formations aligned politically with Riyadh.

The NSF have redeployed all its Brigades from Aden, Lahj, Al Dhale', Abyan, and Shabwa into eastern Yemen. In Hadramawt, their primary concentration is along the Al Abr and Al Wadi'ah corridor near the Saudi border, where at least 20,000 soldiers from a minimum of ten NSF and YEF brigades are currently deployed. These units are positioned to control border crossings, secure desert supply routes, and deny STC forces uncontested access to northern and eastern Hadramawt.

The commander of the Saudi-backed NSF circulated a WhatsApp message to all Shield Forces units congratulating personnel on the successful and safe redeployment of all units from Aden, Lahj, Abyan, and Al-Dhale' to new bases across Al-Abr and Al-Wadi'ah.

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The message made no reference to Yemeni military commanders, instead conveying congratulations and appreciation from the Chief of Saudi Arabia's Joint Forces, Lt. Gen. Fahd bin Hamad Al-Salman, who praised the operation's success and the discipline of the forces. It emphasized that the redeployment was completed without casualties or security incidents and confirmed that Saudi-backed units are now consolidated within the NSF's 2nd Military Division's area of control in Al-Wadi'ah, signaling that Riyadh continues to keep military options open should STC-affiliated forces refuse to withdraw from Wadi Hadramawt.

This NSF deployment is deeply concerning, as it exposes Al-Anad Air Base in Lahj Governorate, one of the largest military installations in southern Yemen, to potential incursions from the Houthis. At a time when tensions with the STC are rising, Saudi-backed forces are repositioning, Sudanese units are withdrawing, and Saudi task forces are drawing down simultaneously, Al-Anad becomes increasingly vulnerable to Houthi attack. Taken together, these dynamics represent a troubling shift for the anti-Houthi coalition.

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The Yemen Emergency Forces add depth and flexibility to this posture. The 1st Emergency Division is commanded by Brigadier General Yasser bin Abdullah al-Ma'bari, who also commands the Azal Axis. His forces are stationed primarily in the Ruwaik desert area in Ma'rib west of Al-'Abr, with three brigades held in reserve for rapid deployment into Hadramawt if escalation occurs.

Another Emergency Forces formation, possibly the 2nd or 5th Division, operates under Major General Yasser Mujalli, commander of the Al-Alb Axis. Separately, there are indications of an additional Emergency Forces formation, increasing the total number of divisions to six; however, its exact designation, command structure, deployment location, and operational readiness remain unclear at this stage.

The 6th Emergency Division is led by Major General Abdul Karim al Sudai, who commands the Maran Axis, providing strategic depth toward the Yemeni-Saudi border. The 4th Emergency Division is commanded by Major General Raddad al Hashimi, who also leads the Kataf Axis, while the 3rd Emergency Division is commanded by Brigadier General Ammar Tamesh and maintains two brigades directly in the Al Wadi'ah sector.

With high confidence, it can be assessed that at least one brigade from the Sixth Division has been recently deployed to Al-Wadi'ah, along with another brigade from the YEF, and that this deployment process remains ongoing.

Together, these divisions form a layered Saudi backed command architecture designed for containment and deterrence rather than rapid offensive action.

Local and Tribal Armed Actors

In addition to formal military units, Saudi Arabia relies on local armed actors to reinforce its position in Hadramawt. The most significant of these is the Hadramawt Protection Forces (HPF), numbering approximately 10,000 fighters and operating under the command of Amr bin Habreesh. These forces draw legitimacy from tribal structures and present themselves as defenders of Hadramawt autonomy rather than as extensions of any external project.

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By way of illustration, leaders of the HPF state that their organization consists of six brigades and that the records of the Hadramawt Tribal Confederation (HTC) include 35,000 fighters. Yet when STC forces moved into these areas, fewer than one hundred fighters mounted any form of resistance, highlighting the disparity between claimed figures and actual mobilizable combat strength.

The same pattern applies to the eight brigades nominally assigned to the First and Second Military Region Commands, often cited as a force of around 20,000 personnel, where only a single checkpoint resisted the STC advance and resulted in limited casualties, further highlighting the gap between reported troop numbers and actual operational capability.

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Smaller armed groups aligned with figures such as Riyad al-Nehdi, including formations associated with the Movement for Change and Liberation, the Arbitration of Hadramawt Tribes, the Hadramawt Inclusive Council, and similar networks, add several hundred fighters to the broader security landscape. While these groups lack the mass, heavy weaponry, and command structure required to directly challenge STC forces in open confrontation, their impact should not be underestimated. Many of their fighters are Bedouins and tribal elements deeply familiar with Hadramawt's vast desert terrain, including unpaved routes, smuggling tracks, and seasonal movement corridors that lie beyond main roads and urban centers.

Hadramawt's sheer size and difficult geography make comprehensive control outside cities and paved highways exceptionally challenging. These smaller forces are able to maneuver discreetly, establish temporary camps, and relocate quickly across the desert, enabling them to harass supply lines, monitor troop movements, disrupt logistics, and exploit gaps in rear security. Even limited actions such as ambushes on transport convoys, interference with fuel and food supply chains, or intelligence sharing with rival actors can impose disproportionate costs on larger forces. In this way, although numerically small, these groups contribute to a fragmented and fluid security environment that complicates consolidation efforts and forces the STC to devote significant resources to area control rather than solely to front-line dominance.

Air Power and Strategic Balance

If Saudi air power were employed decisively, the balance would shift in favor of Saudi backed forces. Sustained air operations would restrict STC maneuverability, disrupt logistics, and impose high costs on any attempt to expand control inland.

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However, recent satellite imagery and force posture assessments show no significant buildup of fixed wing aircraft at Saudi airbases near the Yemeni border regions adjacent to Hadramawt. Current Saudi air activity appears limited to patrols, deterrence flights, and rotary wing operations rather than preparations for sustained intervention.

Undated videos show Saudi Apache and Black Hawk helicopters flying within Hadramawt's territory. Also, there have been multiple reports of Saudi fighter jets conducting sonic booms over areas controlled by STC forces in Wadi Hadramawt, accompanied by the deployment of flares at night and smoke during the day. These actions have been documented on at least three occasions, indicating a clear signaling intent.

Commentary

In its current configuration, the STC and UAE-backed forces are stronger on the ground inside Hadramawt in terms of cohesion, experience, and operational initiative. Saudi-backed forces are stronger in terms of strategic depth, escalation control, and long-term containment capability. Neither side possesses an uncontested path to dominance without triggering broader regional consequences.

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